

Jakub Šimkovič: The Great Divide: 50th Anniversary of the Slovak Secession

*1989 presented the society in Central Europe with a fresh opportunity to reflect on the past, prior to the Communist regime. In the case of Czechoslovakia, the swift twofold regime-change between the years 1945 to 1948 meant giving up on the legacy of the democratic interwar Czechoslovak republic and a vigorous condemnation of the brief Slovak independence. The public now had a chance to “rediscover” these eras, re-evaluate the narrative and to vindicate its main protagonists. The exile intelligentsia making its way back home began to affect the viewpoint regarding the so-called Slovak State, thus starting the everlasting divide. The descendants of the Nazi satellite state representatives sought to reclaim their possessions and stature. In doing so, they applied various approaches both in their written production, as well as in the communication with the general public. These efforts were accentuated by the fact, that the Roman Catholic Church was hesitant to condemn its own clergymen collaborating with the regime. On the other hand, the Communist era historiography was scrutinised, often deemed to be unreliable. Established scientists had to defend their pre-1989 work. Ultimately, the attempt to reconcile both sides of the argument was unsuccessful, and their interactions have been very limited ever since, almost non-existent. Exile narrative was able to make its way into some of the institutions time and time challenging the moral landscape of the country.*

The two noncompatible views on the Slovak State, and subsequently its president Jozef Tiso, became swiftly apparent after the collapse of the Communist regime. As early as in 1992, the prominent historian Dušan Kováč noted that these views were oscillating on extreme ends of the spectrum as some sought to beatify the president, while others had condemned him.<sup>1</sup>

Back then however, there was some attempt at reconciliation. The year 1992 marks the first and the last major effort of the Slovak Academy of Sciences to approach exiled historians. The now notorious symposium at Častá-Papiernička brought together researchers from both sides of the spectrum. An event of such proportions, both in size, setup and significance, is yet to be replicated. Since then, the main protagonists have been retelling the story of that encounter. President Tiso here represented the negatives of the fascist regime, while to some he served as the symbol of the Slovak independence. From 1942, to fend off his opposition, Tiso has been officially referred to as 'Vodca' in an obvious attempt to mimic the title of the Third Reich's 'Führer'. Therefore, his actions are rightfully deemed inseparable from state policies.

This study attempts to categorise methods altering the prevalent portrayal of the first Slovak Republic, and to clearly demonstrate when the motivation of any given author goes beyond scientific endeavour. In order to steer the public opinion, both sides of the notional spectrum employed procedures, which shall be analysed and explained in the forthcoming text.

At the turn of the Velvet Revolution, there was almost no domestic production on the matter. The condemnation of the fascist regime has manifested itself as an omission of this period in written debates. The Iron Curtain effectively removed 'what if you are wrong' question, and the communist

---

<sup>1</sup> V. Bystrický, Š. Faňo, *Pokus o politický a osobný profil Jozefa Tisu* (Bratislava, 1992), p. 9.

establishment had no intention to recognize neither existence nor significance of foreign output. The situation abroad was drastically different, as many of the former high-ranking officials opted for exile. These officials then started to push their account of recent history.

The so-called mythologization of the Slovak independence was a conscious and long-lasting process, already put in motion. In 1930s, the Populists were frequently accentuating their role as the sole voice of the Slovak Nation, while antagonizing both Czechs and Slovak centrists alike. Their totalitarian efforts were at its peak in 1941, when the state-party's ideologue Štefan Polakovič published his work *Slovak National Socialism: Ideological Notes*<sup>2</sup>. Polakovič, a young theologian that previously studied in Rome, suggested a Slovak version of National Socialism relying heavily on catholic morality. He invokes both French Christian philosopher Maurice Blondel as well as German historian Oswald Spengler, whom he calls Oto. At the time European Jews were being executed by thousands, Polakovič wrote: "The moral principles are forcing Europe to evict Jews to a single place, where they may take care of themselves."<sup>3</sup>

Incidentally, the very same Polakovič worked tirelessly in exile, albeit not mentioning the need to build the 'Nation Cult' or to follow the 'God-chosen supreme leader' as before. He wrote several works in English and Spanish on Slovak history, thus warranted to be included in a group I hereby call exile historians. In his later works, he never did revert to his role in instrumenting the state-sponsored hatred in Slovakia. Polakovič spent the rest of his life in Argentina. During this period, he was active in the Slovak World Congress collaborating with other expatriated Populists.

#### *In search of truth*

In 1989, more than 50 years after the first Slovak declaration of independence, the struggle to build up the prevalent public narrative concerning the republic set up at Hitler's will was starting to unfold. Everyone waging his opinion had to navigate between sets of issues, which may have had different significance going from one author to another. To better illustrate this, president Tiso stood his trial for allegations of dismantling Czechoslovakia, not for his responsibility for Jewish deportations. The fervent faith manifested by the president, who continued taking care of his parish while being in office, made him an icon. Furthermore, his overtly anti-Bolshevik rhetoric and pious language would fit in well within the Western society of 1950's.

On the other hand, the domestic debate was sealed shut with the reinstallment of the Czechoslovak government at the end of the World War II. "From 1945, the symbolic message of Tiso could have been carried on, sustained and cultivated almost exclusively by the fraction of political exile,"<sup>4</sup> said Ľubomír Lipták of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. Lipták was one of the historians, who stated working in 1960s. After the collapse of the communist regime, he regretted using the Marxist vocabulary, e.g. naming the populist policies clero-fascism. His seminal work *Slovakia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* was first published in 1968, then reprinted in 2000 and 2011. He was banned from publishing by the communist regime for almost twenty years. Yet Lipták, Kováč and Academia's prime expert on the Slovak State - Ivan Kamenec are labelled by their counterparts as Marxist for being members of the Communist party. This sort of condemnation of the entire domestic academic staff is a generalisation which intentionally leaves out the fact that the room for scientific work was limited within the frame of the regime. The works which explicitly state that their intention is to give 'Marxist interpretation' of the history or to 'fight the populist ideology' such as Ladislav Lipscher's

---

<sup>2</sup> Š. Polakovič, *Slovenský národný socializmus: ideové poznámky* (Bratislava, 1941), 157 p.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ľ. Lipták, *Slovensko v 20. storočí* (Bratislava, 1968), 365 p.

1957 book *Populist Autonomy: Illusions and Reality*<sup>5</sup> are no longer in circulation. The same, however, cannot be said about the numerous works published abroad in English, and later translated to Slovak. As I shall later demonstrate, the sheer volume of these works is one of the ways how to distort the existing narrative.

#### *Axioms/Premise*

The interwar Czechoslovakia was a flawed democracy reluctant to grant autonomy to its minorities. In order to limit German influence, the founders of Czechoslovakia created a false narrative, stating Czechs and Slovaks were two branches of same nation. This mistaken policy made Slovak politicians wary of any further efforts of the central government in Prague, as it very much reminded them of a Hungarian denationalisation policy of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. To make things worse, there was a clear attempt to close the gap between Czech and Slovak languages.

In the abstract of my paper, I dare to call the regime in the First Slovak Republic fascist. The modest length of this text does not allow me to discuss various reasons for that to an appropriate extent. Nonetheless, I will hereby briefly summarize. The Slovak constitution did allow to participate on politics via single political party – the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party. In the 1930s, this party set up its own militia, which later engaged in street fighting, menacing the opposition, and finally in 1942, corralling the people into the transports. The president, as well as the less radical wing of the party, modelled its vision of society based on the works of Austrian philosopher Othmar Spann. British historian Mary Heimann explains: "In this utopia that this new corporatist order was supposed to bring about, class antagonisms were to be healed though a medieval conception of a society as a single body in which everyone's work was sanctified because it contributed to the organic whole."<sup>6</sup>

The Slovak State was the first country to join the World War II alongside Germany. Immediately after declaring independence, Slovaks were forced to sign a 'protective' deal, which has made such move mandatory, as the Slovak foreign policy had to be line with the German one. Anti-Jewish rhetoric in Slovakia predates any state-building efforts. Founding a state as a by-product of the German aggression in the central Europe, however, further aggravated the struggle of the Jewish minority. As Timothy D. Snyder detailed in his book *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, that Slovakia and Croatia were the two counties where the Jewish population suffered the highest proportional losses.<sup>7</sup> Up until 1989, Holocaust studies were one of the glaring omissions that did not spark the debate on either side of the pond.

#### *Volume*

The Populists were arguably very good at networking amongst the large Slovak community in the United States. As early as in 1928, populist Karol Sidor, who was to become prime minister for a very short time, published his detailed account of the Slovaks living abroad. His book *Slovaks in the Foreign Resistance*<sup>8</sup> shows a genuine interest in those people, who were in many ways essential to the founding of Czechoslovakia. The Slovak People's Party engaged well with the Slovak League of America. On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of Czechoslovakia, the US delegation came to visit, bringing along the original of The Pittsburgh Agreement. This trip was consulted by Tiso himself as he had previously spent whole a month<sup>9</sup> in the United States. Members of the Hlinka party who

---

<sup>5</sup> L. Lipscher, *Ľudácka autonómia – Ilúzie a skutočnosť* (Bratislava, 1957), 319 p.

<sup>6</sup> M. Heimann, *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed* (New Haven, 2009), p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> See T. D. Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York, 2015), p. 200-213.

<sup>8</sup> K. Sidor, *Slováci v zahraničnom odboji* (Bratislava, 1928). 264 p.

<sup>9</sup> 9/10/1937 to 11/12/1937

had decided to leave Czechoslovakia found favourable milieu to settle around the Great Lakes<sup>10</sup>. Sidor died in Montreal seven years after WWII, his son-in-law František Vnuk became one of the most notorious exile historians. In Canada, he was accompanied by the secretary general of the state-party Jozef M. Kirschbaum and his son Stanislav, who later happened to become professor at the York University in Toronto, but the crucial role in uniting the expatriate world was played out by former minister of foreign affairs Ferdinand Ďurčanský operating from Munich, Germany. Sidor, Kirschbaum and Ďurčanský had played important role in dismantling Czechoslovakia and profited of their stature in the newly established totalitarian state. Ďurčanský was conspiring against Czechoslovakia in cooperation with the Viennese Nazis, urging Slovakia to secede before the Munich Agreement.

Going into 1989, the domestic scientific production was heavily outnumbered. The monographies on president Tiso started popping up shortly after his execution. The first one, written by his friend Konštantín Čulen, was published in 1947 in Cleveland, Ohio. The last one worth mentioning was a 1987 'testimony' of Tiso's personal secretary Karol Murín hailing from Hamilton, Ontario. In the meantime, there were hundreds of monographies, memoirs, papers, and conferences on Slovak independent statehood. Such volume makes it harder to disprove that Czech policies are to blame for Munich<sup>11</sup>, the independence of Slovakia was proclaimed in order to ensure the survival of the nation<sup>12</sup>, or that the Slovak National Uprising was purely 'theatrical' endeavour prompted by opportunism<sup>13</sup>.

Nevertheless, not only revisionists were active abroad, the former leader of the Democratic Party Jozef Lettrich was briefly at the helm of the The Council of Free Czechoslovakia (1954-1957). In 1955, he wrote *The History of Modern Slovakia*, published in New York City. This rare work written from the Czechoslovakist standpoint stands on its own within the exile production. Lettrich details what he calls 'treasonable and incriminating activities' of the Hlinka Party: "The alleged liberation of Slovakia, as agreed between Tuka, Ďurčanský, Keppler, Seyss-Inquart, and Bürckel was a conspiracy to be carried out by the acts of terrorism against anyone who stood in the way of Conspirators."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Lettrich alleged that Ferdinand Ďurčanský, the first chairman of the Slovak World Congress to be, was on the payroll of the German secret service Sicherheitsdienst. Vnuk calls this book a 'lampoon'<sup>15</sup>.

### *Substitution*

Jozef Tiso was a well-educated and devout man, who wanted to achieve Slovak independence by evolutionary steps. He was not as radical as his colleagues, who later made it to the exile. In 1947, the Czechoslovak government hastily executed Tiso not considering the long-term impact of such decision. Tiso's 'martyrdom', however, proved to be somewhat convenient. The chairman of the Slovak League of America Ľudovít Pavlo was quoted as saying: "I was glad that Tiso died a martyr, since we were given a hero and a saint. I was afraid that he might be sentenced to life in a minimum-security prison, receive adequate nourishment, and fall into oblivion."<sup>16</sup> People trying to figure out

---

<sup>10</sup> For a full list of organizations established by Slovak expatriates see the conference proceedings by P. Jašek, *Svetový kongres Slovákov v zápase proti komunistickému režimu* (Bratislava, 2018), p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> F. Ďurčanský, *Pohľad na slovenskú politickú minulosť* (Bratislava, 1943/1996), p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> S. Kirschbaum, *A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival* (New York, 1995/2005), p. 186.

<sup>13</sup> F. Vnuk, *Rebelanti a suplikanti* (Lakewood, 1989), p. 280.

<sup>14</sup> J. Lettrich, *The History of Modern Slovakia* (New York, 1955), p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> K. Sidor, F. Vnuk, *Moje poznámky k historickým dňom* (Middletown, 1971), p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> E. Krekovič, E. Mannová, E. Krekovičová, *Mýty naše slovenské* (Bratislava, 2005/2013), p. 198.

See also G. Hoffmann, *Zamlčaná pravda o Slovensku* (Partizánske, 1996), 811 p.

their opinion on Tiso are tempted to substitute his presidency with the Slovak statehood, which was the case for his apologists, foes, as well as communist judiciary.

The substitution, however, works in both ways. The negatives of the populist regime are often blamed on two men. On several occasions, the exile authors, such as Vnuk and Milan S. Ďurica, alluded to the possibility that the leaders of the radical wing of the Populist party, Vojtech Tuka and Alexander Mach, acted on their own when it comes to the deportations of Jews<sup>17</sup>. This claim is called into question by the contemporary legal system which had to be adjusted in order to legalise transports, as well as the timeline of the Jewish tragedy in Europe. By the time Slovakia agreed to deport its Jews and pay the 'Settlement fee', Europe had witnessed tightening of the racial laws, the Night of Broken Glass and the Babi Yar massacre during the eastern war campaign, where Slovaks fought alongside Nazi soldiers.

### *Obscurity & Omission*

One of the techniques that make verifying of another author's work ever more challenging is relying on scattered sources of little significance. Milan S. Ďurica, who was the founder of Eastern European Studies Centre in Padua, is frequently citing lower ranking German officers to illustrate their discontent with Slovak officials. This approach is exercised to an absurd extent dealing with the so-called Jewish exemptions. These documents were handed out by the President's Office to those individuals, who were deemed indispensable to the society. Though a farrago of various personal testimonies, reports of German officers, rumours, and side notes, Ďurica puts the number of thusly saved Jews at around 40.000<sup>18</sup>. In 2011, speaking to SITA Slovak News Agency, Martin Lacko of the Nation's Memory Institute said he was aware of 828 presidential pardons to Jewish families. The dubious play on numbers is an implausible solution to someone, who might be accused of being co-responsible for stripping Jews of their human rights. Durčanský and Jozef M. Kirschbaum decided not to comment on Holocaust.

### *Self-replication*

Ďurica's numbers are the prime example of cyclic citations that the Populists employ in order to distort the public opinion. When it comes to Jewish deportations to concentration camps, other exile historians cite Ďurica as their source. This loop is impenetrable to a non-academic reader unwilling to go at lengths to question his credibility. To illustrate this approach; Stanislav Kirschbaum in his work *A History of Slovakia* employed this approach twice<sup>19</sup>, both times referring to Ďurica. Citing colleagues of the same background is a phenomenon that is now called confirmation bias, or echo chamber.

The existence of the two opposite camps of historians also allowed up for self-praising conferences on their work. In 2018, the latest rendition of these ventures was published by the Nation's Memory Institute in Bratislava. Exile historian and former member of the present-day Slovak parliament Jozef M. Rydlo here explains that the exile knew the importance of writing in English in order to change the image of Slovakia that was damaged by the 'unfavourable propaganda' during WWII. Rydlo summarizes the main activities of the Slovak World Congress, of which he was a very much part. He points to 'uncompromising struggle' against communism of the Hlinka Party's members, palliates

---

<sup>17</sup> M. S. Ďurica, *Slovensko za druhej svetovej vojny – Slovenská republika*. In J. M. Rydlo, Slovensko v retrospektíve dejín (Lausanne, 1976), p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> Compare M. S. Ďurica, *Jozef Tiso a Židia* (Bratislava, 2008), 136 p. and M. S. Ďurica, *Jozef Tiso: Životopisný profil* (Bratislava, 2006), p. 356-411.

<sup>19</sup> S. Kirschbaum, *A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival* (New York, 1995/2005), p. 199-200.

their dealings with Nazis, and laments about not being publicly appreciated. Similar conferences of Slovak exile historians first appeared in Zürich in 1975<sup>20</sup>.

### *Revision*

The works of the exile historians as well as few Marxist texts on the highly controversial era are an invaluable source of information. However, one must bear in mind the missuses of history, which is not always the case for the general public. My paper therefore opens the question of gatekeeping in a democratic society. In the flurry of historic books, readers may be easily subject to unduly influencing. Limiting the freedom of expression is equally wrong, but any scientific debates on these matters do not translate well to the public. The same way the historians are polarized on the issues of nationalism, faith and traditional values, is the same way the society tends to split into two groups. Briefly after 1989, the populist message of the 1940s seemed to attract few fringe political parties. Today, their pretend spiritual successor, the People's Party Our Slovakia, sit in parliament.

As I have shown earlier, the exile historians were emotionally involved in the debate, often having familial ties to fascist regime. To broaden the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to compare the contemporary reception of exile historians in other Third Reich's satellites. I believe that the very same set of issues had to be dealt with in Croatia, Hungary, or Romania. The unfortunate insertion of another totalitarian regime hindered rendering the collaborators liable in a fair trial. It is impossible to exclude bias from our work. However, employing the said techniques to steer the narrative is to my mind morally dubious. 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Slovak secession saw much of the political activism disguised as historiography.

---

<sup>20</sup> P. Jašek, *Svetový kongres Slovákov v zápase proti komunistickému režimu* (Bratislava, 2018), p. 51.